

The best Jersey restaurants of 2008  
by Teresa Politano/For The Star-Ledger  
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Here is a list of our favorite restaurants in 2008, in no particular order.

Sushi is stunning at Aozora, where Chef Nelson Yip has created a Zen-like Japanese/European fusion restaurant. We loved the lobster bisque and filet mignon with jumbo shrimp over risotto. Desserts are kitchen-mades. (Aozora Japanese Restaurant, 407 Bloomfield Ave., Montclair, 973-233-9400, aozorafusion.com.)

Restaurant de Benito is one of the best in the state, but still a best-kept secret. Kitchen-made fettuccine with veal ragu is unforgettable; best dessert is the pignoli tart. Impressive wine list. You leave feeling the world is a better place. (Restaurant de Benito, 222 Galloping Hill Road, Union, 908-964-5850, dabenito.com.)

Next Door won't disappoint. This tiny storefront abuts its sister restaurant, the acclaimed Blu. Nothing fancy here, just a terrific price-to-quality ratio. Best bets: risotto with caramelized onions, fettuccini with mushrooms and garlic. Chef Zod Arifai again demonstrates his kitchen discipline and expectation for excellence. (Next Door, 556 Bloomfield Ave., Montclair, 973-744-3600, restaurantblu.com.)

Zafra is a tiny Cuban-Latino restaurant with no airs -- oilcloth on tables, chairs so close you'll elbow your neighbors. Best dinner is the roast pork; genuine, tender. Flan is dense and creamy, but the Uruguayan crepes with dulce de leche are the stuff of legend. Try the hot chocolates; owner Maricel Presilla is a chocolate expert. (Zafra, 301 Willow Ave., Hoboken, 201-610-9801, zafrakitchens.com.)

The menu at Basilico is overstuffed with classic Italian fine dining recipes. It's a romantic restaurant with old-school Continental service. Loved the cream of wild mushroom soup, lamb Bolognese and organic chicken. Pastry chef Donna Sardello could lure us back with her ricotta cheesecake alone. (Basilico, 324 Millburn Ave., Millburn, 973-379-7020, basilicomillburn.com.)

Exposed brick walls. Gloriously well-worn hardwood floors. A bustling bar, crowded tables. Polished yet authentic, 27 Mix is a small (35 seats), vibrant restaurant serving gourmet food with Southwestern influences. We'd recommend the grilled polenta smothered with mushrooms; also, the jerk spiced chicken breast. Desserts are made in house. (27 Mix, 27

Halsey St., Newark, 973-648-0643, 27mix.com.)

Camillo's Cafe has a clear philosophy -- passionate and authentic Italian cooking, with an emphasis on fresh ingredients. Our favorites: marinated artichokes wrapped in prosciutto; kitchen-made pappardelle with sweet sausage; a velvety filet mignon. (Camillo's Cafe, Princeton Shopping Center, 301 North Harrison St., Princeton, 609-252-0608, camilloscafe.net.)

Novita is a neighborhood restaurant with inventive dishes, friendly service and remarkably good food. Try the crab salad, a totally retro '50s appetizer loaded with creme fraiche. Pollo Florentine is robust, and the tasting menu is impressive (Novita Bistro & Lounge, 25 New St., Metuchen, 732-549-5306, novitanj.com.)

Chef Wayne B. Lyons offers white-tablecloth soul food at Soul Flavors. Food is friendly but also less blunt, with a delicate interplay of flavors and a fusion of cuisines. Plus great prices. Cornbread is sweet, buttery, with real kernels of corn. Desserts are exquisite. (Soul Flavors, 354 Grove St., Jersey City, 201-217-3004, soulflavors.com.)

Su serves vegetarian food in an almost meditative environment. Best dishes were the small plates. An artisan bread with aged gruyere and parmesan, plus an assortment of mushrooms, olives and sun-dried tomatoes, was light and simultaneously sweet and zesty. Grilled portobello mushroom caps were firm yet savory. Desserts, too, more than met expectations. (Su, 725 River Road, Unit 21, Edgewater, 201-840-7988, surestaurant.com.)

No jackets are required, but Luciano's, a cavernous Tuscan-style restaurant, evokes a more genteel time. Not a mediocre dish on the table. Menu includes many standards -- fried zucchini, mozzarella and roasted peppers, veal saltimbocca. A great place to bring family for a good white-tablecloth meal at reasonable prices. Desserts, too, are made with care. (Luciano's Ristorante & Lounge, 1579 Main St., Rahway 732-815-1200, lucianosristorante.com.)